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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAMIR GEAGEA ON THE TRIBUNAL, BOLSTERING
MARCH 14, AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 4/26 meeting with the Ambassador, Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea said the Special Tribunal is in the UN's hands and no longer achievable through Lebanese internal dynamics. He thought it important to launch the tribunal process and obtain UNSC approval before French President Chirac leaves office. Establishing the tribunal would be a victory for the March 14 Coalition, it would undermine the morale of the opposition, and it would maintain momentum for the government through presidential elections in November. Geagea was adamant about the need for a strong Christian leader for president, and the six-year tenure of a compromise candidate would just prolong the political crisis. Geagea said that finding a candidate acceptable to all March 14 members is realistic, and he has a plan to do so. He believes it would be best if he and Michel Aoun came to an agreement on the candidate, but realized this might not be possible. Geagea confirmed rumors that Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation head Pierre Daher was trying to make a deal with Saudi billionaire Prince Walid bin Talal and his Rotana media station, but said an assertion of the LF's ownership rights had thwarted Daher's plans. End summary.

MOVEMENT ON THE TRIBUNAL NECESSARY BEFORE MAY 17

¶2. (C) On April 26, Ambassador and Econoff met with Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Dr. Samir Geagea at his rented hotel residence in Bzoummar. The Ambassador asked for Geagea's views on the current push for the UN Security Council's (UNSC) establishment of the Special Tribunal. Some Lebanese contacts say it might be better to wait until after May 31 to give Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri the opportunity to convene parliament and allow deputies to ratify the tribunal themselves. Geagea said that waiting until the end of May is not needed, because for most Lebanese the tribunal is in UNSC hands and no longer subject to internal Lebanese dynamics.

¶3. (C) Geagea speculated that "legalists" would suggest waiting until after May 31, when the current session of the (still unconvened) Parliament expires. But it is more important to have the United States, France, Great Britain, and Russian support action to approve the Tribunal at the UNSC. The Tribunal process should be launched before French President Chirac leaves office on May 17, given that waiting

for the next French president to get up to speed and take an interest in Lebanon could take too long. He also noted what seems to be a divergence between the official Russian attitude toward the tribunal, expressed by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Saltanov, and Russian Ambassador to Lebanon Boukin's comments. Saltanov, who presumably is more authoritative, is less hard-line than Boukin.

BOLSTERING THE MARCH 14 COALITION

14. (C) Geagea stated that establishing the tribunal would be a victory and score political points for March 14. It also would undermine the morale of the opposition, especially Hizballah, which have put their efforts into blocking the tribunal. It is unclear if Hizballah has been acting under orders from Syria on this issue, but the fact remains that the two have worked toward the same goal of stopping the tribunal. Syria probably cares more about it than Hizballah.

For Hizballah, the tribunal represents an evil Western conspiracy and something to fear intrinsically. Hizballah may believe that the tribunal might be used to indict Hizballah terrorist chief 'Imad Mughniyah. Geagea discounted the idea that a Chapter VII mandate on the tribunal would create more security concerns in Lebanon. He noted there might be a higher threat to international forces, but internal security concerns are already very high and the tribunal would not materially change that.

15. (C) Geagea thought the tribunal would also give March 14 momentum toward the presidential election in November. He did not believe there would be a Cabinet shuffle or expansion before the election; the situation seemed to be in a holding pattern. He noted that Prime Minister Siniora's recent public comments discussing a 17-13 Cabinet split were an

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attempt to highlight the nature of the ongoing political crisis. Siniora's latest formula refutes the claim that there is just one minister at stake, as the opposition asserts, but Siniora's proposal will not break the deadlock. He claimed that the demand to replace the six opposition Cabinet members who walked out in November 2006 was a "dare" by Berri and the opposition, as President Lahoud will never sign their appointments. Geagea commended Siniora for doing a good job, despite his sometimes frustrating tendency to be slow and cautious.

16. (C) In addition to the tribunal, March 14 would be strengthened by more donor aid to help cover government expenditures. Geagea said that many infrastructure projects needed to be started and completed. He advocated pressure on Siniora to spend money on these projects.

STRONG CHRISTIAN PRESIDENT REQUIRED

17. (C) Geagea was adamant on the need for a strong Christian leader as president. Six years of a compromise candidate would prolong the political crisis and be an unacceptable setback for the Christian community. The Christians have been deprived of a real president for more than a decade (with Geagea thus including former President Elias Hrawi in his condemnation). Strategically, it is also necessary to have a strong president because the president must balance other factions within Lebanon. The new president should come from March 14. For now, March 14 has the slight upper hand going in to the elections, benefiting from multisectarian popular support and 70-member majority bloc in the 128 member parliament that elects the president. Moreover, the majority of the population favors elections, not electoral boycotts. He recalled again that having the tribunal ratified would further reinforce the majority as a coalition that can achieve its goals.

18. (C) Geagea was optimistic about finding a candidate

acceptable to all March 14 members and also able to win the parliamentary vote. However, it is equally important that the March 14 Coalition find a candidate whom they all could back, and if not settle on a single person, the coalition will fragment. He did not foresee a scenario in which the opposition would nominate Michel Aoun and March 14 would nominate Geagea, with eventual resort to a second tier compromise candidate after the Aoun-Geagea contest reached an impasse. Geagea noted that Sunni leader Saad Hariri will be easier to sway into supporting a strong Christian candidate than would Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who will hope for more influence over the president. But in the end, as long as both Hariri and Jumblatt feel that they have participated in the decision, they will accept a strong Christian candidate.

GETTING AOUN ON BOARD WOULD HELP

¶9. (C) Geagea argued in favor of his getting together with Michel Aoun to discuss presidential candidates. Geagea noted that Aoun's participation is preferable because, despite his waning popularity, Aoun will still have at least 20 percent support after the presidential election. Certain groups around Aoun will never support March 14 or the Lebanese Forces. He commented that the other sects could not oppose any candidate supported by both Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the LF, the two dominant Christian groups. Geagea said his own people and Aoun's maintain contact at a low level. He believes that some of the FPM members are not happy with Aoun's policies. Both the Ambassador and Geagea agreed that Aoun is probably not getting from his own team a true picture of his diminished support. Geagea agreed that the chance for success in getting Aoun to pick another presidential candidate other than himself, in agreement with the LF, might be slim, but it is worth trying.

GEAGEA'S PLAN FOR SELECTING THE PRESIDENT

¶10. (C) Geagea noted that while Maronite Patriarch Sfeir is likely to push for presidential elections, the Patriarch will not name his preferred choice nor help negotiate on candidates among the factions. Geagea plans to select one or two candidates * preferably people both he and Aoun can agree on * and then quietly vet the names with the Patriarch. Once Patriarch Sfeir knows (and approves) of the

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candidate, Sfeir will become even more vocal in calling for presidential elections, unofficially signaling his support. Geagea thinks this will have the dual effect of getting the Patriarch's "unofficial" blessing for the March 14 candidate and, if Aoun is still allied with the opposition, embarrass Aoun. After Geagea has vetted candidates with the Patriarch he will discuss them with his 14 March allies, who will be unlikely to go against a candidate supported by the Patriarch.

¶10. (C) Geagea does not expect to implement his plan anytime soon because he wants to give Aoun time to switch alliances or negotiate candidates with Geagea before March 14 enters into its candidate selection process. He noted that, for now at least, it is unlikely Aoun would be willing to break with Hizballah and ally with March 14. Perhaps closer to the elections) as Aoun realizes he will lose more credibility and support if he opposes presidential elections as Geagea expects the opposition to do - he may decide to join the majority as a last chance to maintain some political influence.

LBC RUMORS TRUE, BUT NOW RESOLVED

¶11. (C) Rumors that the LF-affiliated Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) head Pierre Daher was trying to make a deal with Saudi billionaire Prince Walid bin Talal and his Rotana

media station were true, but Geagea said the issue has been resolved. Geagea said Daher wanted to expand his business irrespective of political gyrations in Lebanon. Daher had wanted to link LBC and Rotana and become chairman of the joint venture for ten years in exchange for giving Prince Walid bin Talal 70 percent ownership in the combined companies. Geagea, who was trying to resolve the issue legally but was extremely frustrated by the court system, said that, at least, the threat of LF resorting to judicial action stopped Daher's plan to sell the majority of LBC to Prince Walid.

FELTMAN